

## ***Anarchy and Christianity***

**By Jacques Ellul**

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Introduction by David W. Gill     [www.davidwgill.org](http://www.davidwgill.org)

Jacques Ellul often made brief comments, in his fifty or so books, affirming a kind of anarchism as the most serious response to the crushing constraints of modern technological society and its invasive, bureaucratic political and economic organization. *Anarchy and Christianity* is his extended essay on the subject in which he defines what he means by anarchism and explains why he favors this stance. He tries to help his readers get beyond stereotypical misunderstandings and the kneejerk repudiations of Christianity by anarchists and of anarchism by Christians.

Ellul proposes an anarchism "not, of course, in the common sense of disorder, but in the sense of *an-arche*: no authority, no domination" (p. 45). Ellul wants to "rule out violent anarchism" while retaining a "pacifist, antinationalist, anticapitalist, moral, and antidemocratic anarchism (i.e., that which is hostile to the falsified democracy of bourgeois states). . . . which acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks, denouncing falsehood and oppression, aiming at a true overturning of authorities of all kinds as people at the bottom speak and organize themselves" (pp. 13-14).

Ellul rejects violence because tactically it is unable to produce freedom or justice and because, for a Christian, it betrays the command to love which is at the heart of Christian faith. Specifically, Ellul urges avoidance of normal politics (even Green Party politics) and conscientious objection to military service, taxes, vaccination and compulsory schooling. He differentiates his anarchism from other varieties by (a) rejecting violence and (b) refusing any utopian optimism about the possibility of a pure anarchist society. An anarchist destruction of social organization cannot lead to a sinless, blissful social situation because human sinfulness is not just a product of political-social arrangements. Thus, anarchism is a stance and a strategy, not a millenarian possibility. What is "possible, livable, and practicable" and even "just" is "the creation of new institutions from the grass-roots level," "a new social model" (p. 21).

Historically, Christians have too often been guilty of collusion with political powers that oppressed the people. But while Ellul regrets this sad story and calls for humility and repentance, he argues that any "metaphysical" objection to Christianity by anarchist thinkers is misplaced. Such texts as Romans 13 ("the powers that be are ordained of God") need to be understood in context. Ellul reviews the biblical narrative and concludes that it teaches a fundamental opposition to excessive power and authority. The God of Scripture is not an imperial authority endorsing other emperors but rather a God who is self-limited in love and who walks alongside of the people.

The biblical prophet and people stand over against the political authorities and are much more important than kings and generals in speaking and doing God's will. Jesus' relation to the powers begins with Herod's attempt to kill him as a baby, confronts or sidesteps the political temptation, forms an alternative kind of community, and ends with a Roman crucifixion---and then the radical surprise of the resurrection. Ellul urges a second look at Revelation, Peter, and Paul in which the call to a "warfare" waged with love is the major theme, qualifying the passages traditionally invoked on behalf of state power and authority. He concludes with some brief appendices concerning the interpretation of Romans 13 and civil disobedience.

Ellul is at his very best in showing the spectrum of biblical story and thought about political power, ranging from ambivalence to opposition. *Anarchy and Christianity* is a brief, intense re-statement of positions he developed earlier --- sociologically in *The Political Illusion* and *Autopsy of Revolution* and biblically in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*.

Not all readers will be convinced that a refusal to vote, run for office, pay taxes or participate in the public school system is the best way to relate to our society and its political organization. It is possible in some cases to have at least a modest impact on our common life by means of school board, rent control board and city council participation. But even if such hopes are thwarted, remember that Ellul often criticized the technological society for its subservience to "effectiveness" or "efficiency." So his observations here that voting and other forms of political participation are ineffective cannot be decisive. Provided all

idolatry and pretension are debunked in favor of modesty, humility and truth, political participation could be a symbolic way of standing alongside our neighbors. After all, Ellul and we don't abandon the church despite its conformity, weakness and failure to live up to its charter. So too, we will not all abandon the state and politics despite their corruption, hypocrisy, weakness and failure. If for no other reason, such participation is a reminder of the fact that God will not stop participating in our lives despite what we are.

Still, some form of depoliticization (a refusal to define all problems in political terms requiring political solutions) is probably called for --- not on the grounds of modern "Tea Party" selfishness but on the grounds of giving communities and individuals freedom and responsibility. But the "arche" are not, finally, limited to political powers and authorities but include giant, life-dominating financial, commercial, and media institutions. Ellul's *Anarchy* is a call to freedom over against all such powers and authorities. As such, it continues to be a fresh, rare, and insightful voice much in need of a hearing.